

AFEHRI File 19-5-1-7

Research Materials/Source Documents

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient: SSgt Jon D. Harston

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were in better shape. They had been mauled but were all alive. The crew stayed put in a small ravine nearby, sticking close to their passenger Marines. *Jolly 13*, commanded by 1st Lt. Charles Greer, came in to try to get them out after he dropped his Marines on the *Holt*. His helicopter was damaged so heavily, however, that he too had to run for the coast. He landed on a beach near Captain Ohlmeier's plane.

All this had happened in scant minutes. But by then, the sun was well up, which provided better vis-

ibility for the last three helicopters in the initial assault wave coming in to deposit their Marines on Koh Tang. They were *Jollys*, which, unlike the "CH" model *Knifes*, could refuel from an HC-130 tanker in the area. They had gone to take on gas while the fighters worked with the downed airmen on the beach. Then *Cricket* sent them in. First Lt. Phil Pacini's *Jolly 42* put his 28 Marines on the west beach, then limped home out of action. Capt. Roland Purser's *Jolly 43* made two tries under heavy fire before getting his 29 Marines to the same

beach. After 1st Lt. Tom Cooper in *Jolly 41* was driven off three times, a *Spectre* gunship came in and raked some automatic weapons sites that were firing at Cooper from nearby slopes of the island. Cooper got to the beach on the fourth try, but was greeted with mortar fire. With five Marines still left aboard, he pulled out. Seconds later he and his crew went back; six Marines had been hit on the beach and needed evacuation. This time a mortar round impacted within a foot of the main rotor blades. As the helicopter de-

for extraordinary

For their actions off Koh Tang last May, helicopter crewmen and forward air controllers received 92 medals for heroism, including four Air Force Crosses—ranked second only to the Medal of Honor—22 Silver Stars, and 50 Distinguished Flying Crosses.



Air Force Cross recipient SSgt. John D. Harston was a flight mechanic aboard Maj. Howard Corson's CH-53 helicopter, one of two that attempted the first landings on Koh Tang's now infamous east beach. They were still about 40 feet in the air when groundfire ripped their aircraft apart. It exploded and fell in flames into the shallow water.

Shot in the leg and dazed by the crash, Sergeant Harston barely managed to get out of the burning CH-53. The survivors outside were under heavy small arms fire from the beach, so he reentered the plane to get an M-16 rifle. Inside, he found some Marines still trap-

ped. Harston led them through the flames to safety.

The first thing Major Corson remembers seeing after the crash was Harston standing outside in chest-deep water trying to open Corson's jammed side-door exit. They realized at the same time it wasn't necessary—there was no aircraft left ahead of the major's seat. It had been blown away. He just stepped forward into the water.

Ignoring the hail of bullets splashing all around them, Harston went around to the other side to free the body of his copilot. The flames drove him back.

As the survivors edged out to sea, Harston stayed back to provide covering fire with his M-16 and pistol. Soon out of ammunition, he picked up the only remaining wounded Marine and headed for deeper water. They were 40 yards offshore when they heard the cries of one more seriously injured, blinded Marine struggling alone near the wreckage.

Sergeant Harston, with the first Marine hanging onto his webbing, went back to help. In the process, one side of his life preserver was shot away and he was stunned by another bullet that hit his helmet. Neither Marine had a life preserver.

In spite of his leg wound, Sergeant Harston managed to swim out to deeper water, tugging the two injured Marines along

Along with the 10 other survivors, they were eventually rescued by a Navy destroyer. Harston is now a C-141 flight engineer with the 15th MAS, Norton AFB, Calif.

Lt. Richard C. Brims almost missed the mission that would bring him the Air Force Cross. En route from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, to the staging base, U-Tapao, two nights before the assault, his aircraft, *Knife 51*, began shaking violently. He had barely made it to U-Tapao. Repairs made the next day failed to correct the problem.

"Everyone else launched [early the next morning]," he remembers, "but we were left sitting there, lonesome on the line, 190 miles from the action." More repairs were



attempted before dawn, but some shaking still persisted. At daybreak, however, word came that they were crucially needed. So they went.

Brims and his crew eventually